THE COMPLEX MATTER OF GOD AND CAESAR
Matthew 22
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I received a telephone call on Friday: A friend wanted to wish me luck. He had read the sermon topic in the bulletin - and observed that in recent weeks Mario Cuomo, Geraldine Ferraro, Archbishop O'Conner, President Reagan, Walter Mondale, and George Bush had all tried to say something about religion and politics and that all probably regreted it. So he wanted to wish me luck. At least, he said, I'd be in good company.

When absolute religious certainty is combined with political power, something happens in history which is rarely good. The founders of this Republic knew that. They knew their history. James Madison wrote that religious establishments "have been seen to erect spiritual tyranny...they have upheld the thrones of political tyranny...in no instance have they been the guardians of the liberty of the people." (New York Times, 9/16/84, E. 23, Henry Steek Commager, "Public Morality, Not Religion")

Religious certainty and political power, when combined, seem almost always to be the enemy of liberty. They also produce a capacity for intolerance and violence which, at this moment, is on the increase around the world.

New York Times Bureau Chief in Beirut, Thomas Friedman, has become an expert on the subject. "People often ask me what was the most frightening moment I lived through in my four years in Lebanon," he wrote recently. He mentions many terrifying incidents but the most frightening happened while he was sitting in the restaurant of the Commodore Hotel.

"The Shiite Moslem Amal militia had siezed control of West Beirut...groups of militiamen, 'The Party of God,' were ransacking heathen bars. I heard a ruckus... turned and saw a tall, heavy-set Shiite with a black beard, a wild look in his eye and an M-16 in his hands, heading for the bar...He shoved the bartender aside and began smashing every bottle and glass with his rifle butt. When he was done, he strode out, leaving behind a small lake on the floor. The reason the incident was so profoundly disturbing to me was that I was confronted that day with something I had never seen so close-up before - the face of violent religious extremism. That militiaman could just as easily have been smashing human beings as bottles. I don't think it would have made a dime's bit of difference to him. He was from the party of God, he had truth with a capital T, he had his M-16, and he was not about to let anything stand in his way." (The New York Times Magazine, 10-7-84, "The Power of Fanaticism," p. 32ff)

It is not a new phenomenon, of course. The late Phyllis McGinty, delightful and witty poet, wrote about two very adamant Reformers, Zwingli and Muntzer, under the title "How to Start a War." The two were strong and outspoken and one of their major differences was on the mode of baptism - sprinkling or total immersion.

"Said Zwingli to Muntzer,
'I'll have to be blunt, sir.
I don't like your version of
Total Immersion.
And since God's on my side
And I'm on the dry side,
You'd better swing ovah
To me and Jehovah.'
"Cried Muntzer, 'It's schism,
Is Infant Baptism!
Since I've had a sigh, sir,
That God's will is mine, sire,
Let all men agree
With Jehovah and me,
Or go to Hell, singly,'
Said Muntzer to Zwingli,
As each drew his sword
On the side of the Lord."

The media is telling us that there is more religion in this presidential campaign than at any time since the middle of the last century, and that much of it is strong, narrow and very sure of itself. "Parson Thwackum religion," someone called it recently. Thwackum is the cleric in Henry Fielding's Tom Jones, who says: "When I say religion I mean the Christian religion, and when I say the Christian religion I mean the Church of England."

If you have tried to have a rational conversation with a religious zealot on any one of the complex political issues before us you know what that means.

The relationship of religion with life, the tension between people who see the truth very differently but must live in the same society, the dynamic between theology and politics, church and state, God and Caesar, is complex and important and troublesome and relevant.

It appears many times in the Bible; the prophets Amos, Jeremiah criticizing the king and being told to stay out of politics. Isaiah commenting on foreign alliances, Paul disturbing the economy and political peace in Ephesus. And, of course, Jesus, who lived in uneasy tension with the authorities in his society and who one day was put directly on the spot. The context is Jesus' noisy Palm Sunday entry to the city, an act which the Roman authorities were persuaded, was overtly political. What follows in Matthew's Gospel is a continuation of the running verbal skirmishes Jesus has been having with the Scribes and Pharisees. The format is ordinarily a question - a trick question, in fact - posed in order to entrap him. On this day it was, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?" The head-tax, 25¢ a year for all residents of a Roman province was a symbol of Israel's humility and oppression.

A revolutionary organization called the Zealots held that the tax was illegal and should not be paid. It is easy to imagine that many ordinary citizens secretly admired the Zealot's courageous position. If Jesus had said simply "Yes, the tax is legal. Pay it," he would have been dismissed by the people as a collaborator.

If he said, "No, do not pay," he would have been arrested as a revolutionary. Either way the Scribes and Pharisees would have succeeded in discrediting him.

The brilliance of Jesus' response is that he avoided the trap. He asked for a coin. One was produced with the head of Caesar on it. In the ancient world the coinage was the property of the Emperor. "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's." What Jesus said was "It's his money anyway. Pay the tax." "But render to God what is God's." No one who heard that concluded that Jesus had just divided society into two compartments, church and state. The very essence of the God whose name he just invoked was sovereignty over all of life. That was the uniqueness of the Hebrew idea of God. God is Lord of Babylon as well as Israel. God is above all earthly power. God is Lord of all of life. "Render to God what is God's" everyone understood, included the rendering a man or woman does to the political state. God is Lord of that, too.

The incident is commonly misinterpreted. Typically we use it to advocate the American experiment of separation of church and state. And although I am devoted to that constitutional principle, I believe we miss the point of this vignette if we limit its interpretation to that.

What Jefferson had in mind was not the separation of religion from politics. That thought would not have occurred to him. What was most dramatic about the American experiment was that here there would be no official state religion. People here would be free to be religious, but most dramatically, free from any coercion or pressure to be religious at all. That had never been tried before. It is one of the abiding wonderments of history that it worked. Almost nobody at the time thought it would, and many people today still don't see how fragile and precious and dynamic that liberty is.

There is another way for the tension between God and Caesar to be resolved. It is the complete divorce of state from church - but also religion from politics. It sounds like what Jesus taught and the way things should be. It is a deceptively appealing idea which divides society into mutually exclusive departments. Tyranny always uses it. It suggests that we are two people: an inner-spiritual person, and an outer-political social person. And if that is true, we are free - as the S.S. officers were, to operate Auschwitz with patriotic efficiency six days a week, and go to church on Sunday morning, with no internal discomfort.

The Constitution of the German Christian Church, founded in 1933 by the Nazi government, contains a chilling phrase which is similar to well-meaning advice extended to prophetic Christians in every age: The church was ordered to devote itself to "the inner mind of the German people." In January of 1934 Reich Bishop Ludwig Mueller ordered all German pastors to confine themselves to "preaching the pure Gospel" which meant avoiding anything having to do with the way life was lived.

One of the banners depicting the Confession of the Presbyterian Church represents the Theological Declaration of Barmen, a brave affirmation by the group of German church leaders which defied the Nazi effort to drive a wedge between religion and politics. Fifty years ago they declared, "We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ but to other lords." Hitler knew exactly what that meant. Some

of the people who signed that declaration died for it. Tyranny has never been able to abide religious freedom and a church that worships a God who transcends the nation.

Our particular roots are in the Reformation, the 467th anniversary of which we celebrate today. It was October 31, 1517 that Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the Castle Church door in Wittenburg. The theological topic was grace. Politically the agenda was the faint beginning of the idea of political liberty. Luther was no democrat. He was a medieval man and historians know that he did not comprehend the long-term political implications of his actions. When the German peasants revolted and used his words to justify their cause, Luther came down hard on the side of the princes, urging them to slaughter as many peasants as possible. But listen for the beginning of the idea of individual freedom - when Luther talked about who had authority to interpret scripture. "I wish to be free," he wrote. "I do not wish to become the slave of any authority, council, university, or Pope. I shall proclaim with confidence what I believe to be true, whether it is authorized or not. (Great Voices of the Reformation, H. Fosdick, p. 100.)

When Luther appeared before the Holy Roman Emperor at the Diet of Worms and refused to recant saying, "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me," he was reflecting his Lord's declaration about God's sovereignty over Caesar's realm, and he was sowing deeply the seed of liberty.

Our particular parentage is in Geneva, the 16th century theocracy of John Calvin. Like Luther, Calvin was a medieval man, an age which universally dealt with heresy by executing heretics. And so he did condemn the humanist Servetus to death for wrong belief. Yet John Calvin is one of the major factors in the evolution of liberty and democracy in the West. He wrote: "We are subject to those who rule over us, but subject only in the Lord. If they command anything against Him, let us not pay the least regard to it." (ibid., p. 200)

There, again, the tiny seed of liberty which would germinate and grow and be articulated theoretically by John Locke, and expressed practically in a new nation with the radical courage to declare that its citizens are free from its own coercion, that their consciences are sacred, accountable, untimely to no earthly authority, free - radically, that is to say - to be given to God.

The matter of God and Caesar is complex indeed. To separate the two realms, tempting as it is, is to violate the very essence of the Judeo-Christian tradition. A totally private faith which has nothing to do with the life of the whole society, is trivial. But on the other side of it, we must be equally careful not to claim too much truth and moral rightness for any candidate, any party, any ideology. A good Calvinist gets very nervous when anybody claims absolute moral rightness and consequently absolute moral wrongness for any who disagree. The Presbyterian genius is to keep affirming God's sovereignty alone and the relativity, the humanness and thus the limits of all our political systems and parties and programs.

I loved discovering a story which illustrates the Presbyterian nuance and subtlety about religious and moral certainty. Archibold Alexander was a stubborn 19th century Presbyterian clergyman who taught at Princeton. His colleague Charles Hodge once said that "Alexander as a general rule never drank wine; but when

the use of wine came to be pronounced sinful, he would sometimes, in company, take a glass for conscience sake." (Martin Marty, Context, 8/1-15/84, vol. 16., #15 from L. Loetscher, "Life of Archibold Alexander.")

Render to God what is God's. That means all of life. All of love and hope, and economic and political vision. God is Lord of all.

Render to Caesar what is Caesar's. I like to think that Jesus meant that too. That part of Christian morality is taking Caesar very seriously. Jesus was not other-worldly. He did not call people away from the everydayness of life. Rather he gave them love and hope and new life and sent them back into fray. So it seems a particular distortion to assume, in his name, that politics is nasty, morally inferior business, to be ignored or laughed at or avoided. Politics is where love takes shape: where justice is done or not done. Politics has the same potential for nobility and grandeur as medicine or law or teaching - perhaps more. George Will in Statecraft Is Soulcraft laments, rightly, that politics suffers a bad press and that Americans continue to be less than devoted to their own best invention. In 1960 - 64% of the voters participated in the presidential election. In 1980 it was 53%. We're not doing as well as we should with the "Render to Caesar" part of the equation.

I submit that part of our vocation, our calling in Christ, is to be informed, astute, and active in the body politic. I submit that we are to bring to that calling our penchant for the truth, our willingness to ask the awkward question, our courage to question every authority that takes itself too seriously. I submit that our vocation is to love the world as pragmatically as we can, and that our model is a God who sent a son to live in our world, as a member of a family, a part of a society, a citizen in a political system. I submit that the redemptive, creative, incarnate love of God in Jesus Christ encompasses the political system by which we order our life, and that our Lord was altogether serious when he said: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God, the things that are God's."

To the blessed and only sovereign, King of kings, Lord of lords, be honor and dominion and glory for ever and ever! Amen.

PECULIAR HONORS TO OUR KING
Matthew 26:3-13
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Have you ever been so moved by passion for a cause that you opened your wallet and gave away money you couldn't afford to give away? Have you ever been so overcome with love that you threw normal prudence to the wind and did something foolishly extravagant? If you have not, that's too bad, because there is a sense in which you haven't loved fully until you've been made to feel a little foolish. Which means that surely all of us have, on some occasion, bought a dozen roses when one would have sufficed, or written a silly love note that still makes us blush to recall it - even if it was in fifth grade, or shouted "I love you, God" into a night sky or prayed it or wrote it into a diary, or even in a cocktail party conversation suddenly turned racist edged ourselves out across the line of socially accepted and expected behavior because of a burning love for God and all his multi-colored children which is planted deeply in our heart.

Though it may have been long ago, and though we will not ordinarily discuss it, we know what it means to be a fool for love, and thus we know this impractical, foolishly extravagant woman who, in those interesting words we rise weekly to sing - brought peculiar honors to the king.

The scene is set by a high level conference in the palace of Caiphas, the priest, puppet ecclesiastic, Jerusalem, 33 A.D. "Jesus must go," they decide. "Enough is enough. He has come to our city, insulted us, caused trouble in the temple, is daily making us look bad. He must go." With that terrible dye cast, Matthew shifts scenes to Bethany, where he was staying with his friends, Mary, Martha, Lazarus. On this evening he is in the home of Simon, who used to have leprosy. They're sitting on the dirt floor, the men are, cross-legged, eating out of a common bowl, probably dipping chunks of bread into oil. They're talking, laughing some - ~~shading it a little~~ about the look on the Pharisees' faces when Jesus turned over the tables and the pigeons got loose and the fat salesman tripped over the lambs and fell into the next booth where the calves were. Without a word she penetrated that clubroom and walked to where Jesus sat, and looked at him intensely knowing that this festivity was prelude to disaster, and caught him extended, dipping his bread in the olive oil, poured out on him the expensive perfume in the precious alabaster jar she had treasured for years, given to her by her mother when she became a woman.

The moment, frozen in time, was powerful; at first awkward, embarrassing, shocking, and as he sat, paralyzed by this peculiar honor - rich, aromatic perfume running down his neck, soaking into his shirt, her vulnerability was punctuated by a gasp from the other side of the circle. "What a monstrous waste! Why, if she had just given that to us, we could have sold it and fed a lot of hungry people."

It is grossly inaccurate to use what he said next as a poverty policy. Jesus spent most of his time with poor people. He was one of them. He was their advocate. At least part of what is going on in the Gospel accounts is the eternal conflict between the haves and have nots, the privileged and underprivileged, the ins and outs. The common people heard him gladly. That means the poor people. He said what he said about them here to protect this woman in her foolish

extravagance. And then, he even tried black comedy. Like a cricitally ill person joking about the funeral, Jesus tries a joke about her annointing him for his burial, because the other event people get annointed for in Israel is coronation.

It's a vulnerable feeling to have acted foolishly for love, like a three year old bringing the prize begonia - plucked and clutched tightly in his hand - to his mother as a gift of love. It's much harder to be the recipient of grace sometimes. Jesus, the lover, loves this woman, honors this woman, by ignoring all that is prudent and sensible and economically viable. "What she has done is beautiful," he announces to her detractors. "She will be remembered forever."

He may have overstated that a bit. She is not, in point of fact, one of the personalities that we remember much at all. And I think the reason is that what she did is peculiar and unlikely and we don't do things like that and the pragmatist in each of us can hear our own voice expressing concern about this wastefulness. to B. If there is anything you and I are worse at than foolish extravagance it is in accepting and honoring a love for us that is extravagantly, peculiarly foolish.

#3 We are inclined to divine value in terms of functionality. What is valuable is what functions efficiently, is productive, efficient. But, in fact, art is not productively functional. Money spent on form could be spent on efficient function. But there is human value to beauty which transcends even the immediacies of hunger and every artist knows that, thank God. In fact, money spent to keep the church beautiful in the city could be buying food. But there is a hunger assumed and addressed by beauty and our love for it that may transcend - not replace - but transcend and energize our commitment to deal with human need. Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, of Newark, New Jersey, has written an excellent article in the Christian Century on the urban church which is very helpful. Bishop Spong observes:

> "Urban life is not beautiful. Garbaage collection is generally poor. Trash litters the streets. Many homes are in poor repair, and some are abandoned bits of dilapidation. Many city people are so depressed that they deliberately fill their lives with ugliness, as an unconscious commentary on the way they feel valued by others. Consequently, it is especially important that city churches be places of beauty...Money spent to beautify urban houses of worship is not wasted, for beauty is a gift. Churches need to bear witness to the power of beauty, and to the sense of caring communicated by clean, sparkling sanctuaries, naves and exteriors...Great churches of the past, with expensive maintenance needs, are the legacy we have bequeathed to urban dwellers. When we fill these churches with poorly prepared liturgies and shallow, inane preaching, we add to the urban poor's sense of being surrounded by a non-caring, non-valuing world. Urban church structures need to shine as centers of beauty, as symbols of hope, as signs of the Kingdom. They need to be living parables of God's caring."

What about the poor? What is our responsibility? What was the disciple's? History teaches a hard lesson here. Humanism without transcendence produces the worker's paradise, as in Ethiopia. Love for humankind which is grounded in love of Jesus Christ and a sense of his love for us, results in instant, overwhelming generosity and its goal is an egalitarianism, equality of justice - grounded in God's created order. + C

God blesses the prudent, careful disposition of our resources. But somewhere in this Good News there is an impetus to love and be loved so much that we know that it means at least to be carried away, to love so thoroughly we are willing to be foolishly extravagant.

And so the tension: the conflict between a Lord who said so simply one time, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also," and a culture which responds, "When E. F. Hutton speaks everybody listens."

#4

God's word comes in disguise sometimes. I find it with some regularity in those delightful Wall Street Journal features which simply hold up for investigative inspection, a slice of contemporary American life. On September 27, for instance, an article appeared on "Yuppie Love - Detroit Auto Makers Try To Increase Sales To Young Professionals." Yuppies, you may know, are "young, urban professionals," who are having an enormous impact on politics and commerce and who are already acknowledged as our culture's next "taste makers." Yuppies are defined variously as "people who listen to National Public Radio while jogging," or typically, "a childless couple, mid'30's, who live in a condo, work hard, do aerobic exercises, canoe in the wilderness and drive a $20,000 Saab." "We are," one of them told the reporter, "very into value."

25,000

Market researchers in the steel and glass towers of Detroit now know that Yuppies and all of us influenced by that image "prefer cars that befit their new affluence, reflect their desire to be socially responsible and don't remind them of their parents." Chrysler and GM have invested more than one billion dollars in the Yuppie cars which will appear later this year. The Journal's moral and subtly sermonic conclusion was in this observation:

> "Yuppies' fondness for gadgets has revived the turbo charger industry and given rise to the $3,000 car radio. Affixed to a turbo-charged Saab seen recently in Detroit was a bumper sticker that read, 'He Who Dies With The Most Toys Wins.'"

Well if we ever got around to understanding and remembering what this extravagant woman did for Jesus one time, we might be saved by a truth deeper than that bumper sticker. And if we don't hear that Gospel, it appears that we can be described, defined and celebrated by that blunt epitaph - "the most toys wins." Jesus taught that the most love wins; that is, the most grace, and giving, and extravagance, and occasional foolishness.

the Utility Company

Of course we must calculate. Someone observed that Columbia Gas will not consider the lilies of the field as monthly payment - regardless of how splendidly they are arrayed. Of course, we have to heat our church and light it and balance the budget and pay the janitors and feed the hungry and clothe the naked and pay the secretaries and shelter the homeless and buy Bibles for the children and announce Good News to the oppressed and fix the organ. And it takes half a million dollars plus a year to do it and a lot of individual generosity. Of course, we have to calculate.

But it helps, our friend Walter Bouman wrote somewhere, to "remember that the church is not first a building or even a religious organization. Church is really what happens to people when the Gospel is happening to them and through them to other people."

Of course, we have to get out the financial data and sharpen the pencils and decide what we can and will give. But somewhere in that there ought to be the impulse of a love so powerful it will risk looking foolish because that is the kind of love that starts it all.

Where have you felt that impulse? Where in your life are you hearing and responding to God's invitation to live as fully as you can by loving and giving? "Where do you experience the glory of God in your life?" - Professor Thomas Troeger, at Colgate/Rochester, asks.

"Where is the power and wonder of God" getting through to you, comforting you, disturbing you, making you disatisfied with yourself, teaching you to love and to be loved?

When the choir and organ fill this room and your heart with beauty? When friends pray for you? When you are privileged to participate in those passage rites of marriage, baptism, here with and for friends of many years? When a worship experience lifts up your heart? Or, when you join your voice with others and sing in a memorial service for a dear one, "Our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come."

Troeger writes, "Affirm how you behold God's glory because of this congregation's ministry and corporate life. Affirm that in a brutalized and bleeding world seemingly without vision, this old building with a clunking furnace and dim yellow lights has been a sign of trancendent hope." (The Christian Ministry, November 1984).

add PT we need to waste

Of course we must calculate. But a greater danger to the church of Jesus Christ than foolishness and irresponsible extravagance is dullness and emptiness and dryness that prudence sometimes becomes. Frederick Buechner suggests that "the church is destroyed by people who are afraid to be human, brave, and loving, and to take chances," and that the church lives where "for Christ's sake we are willing to look like fools: where we understand that without simplicity and passion and outlandishness no church is worth two cents." (A Room Called Remember, p. 125)

#5

That's true about us as a church. And it is true about us as individuals. The invitation of Jesus Christ is to fullness of life. It is to allow the love and passion within us to be expressed. It is an invitation to tears of joy at God's love for us, and a passion for the life of the world in God's love. It is an invitation to music and laughter and to a freedom on occasion to be so overwhelmed by it all that we will even risk becoming foolish for the love of Christ. It is an invitation issued here weekly to every creature - to you, me - to rise and bring peculiar honors to the King.

Praise and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and strength to our God forever and ever. Amen.